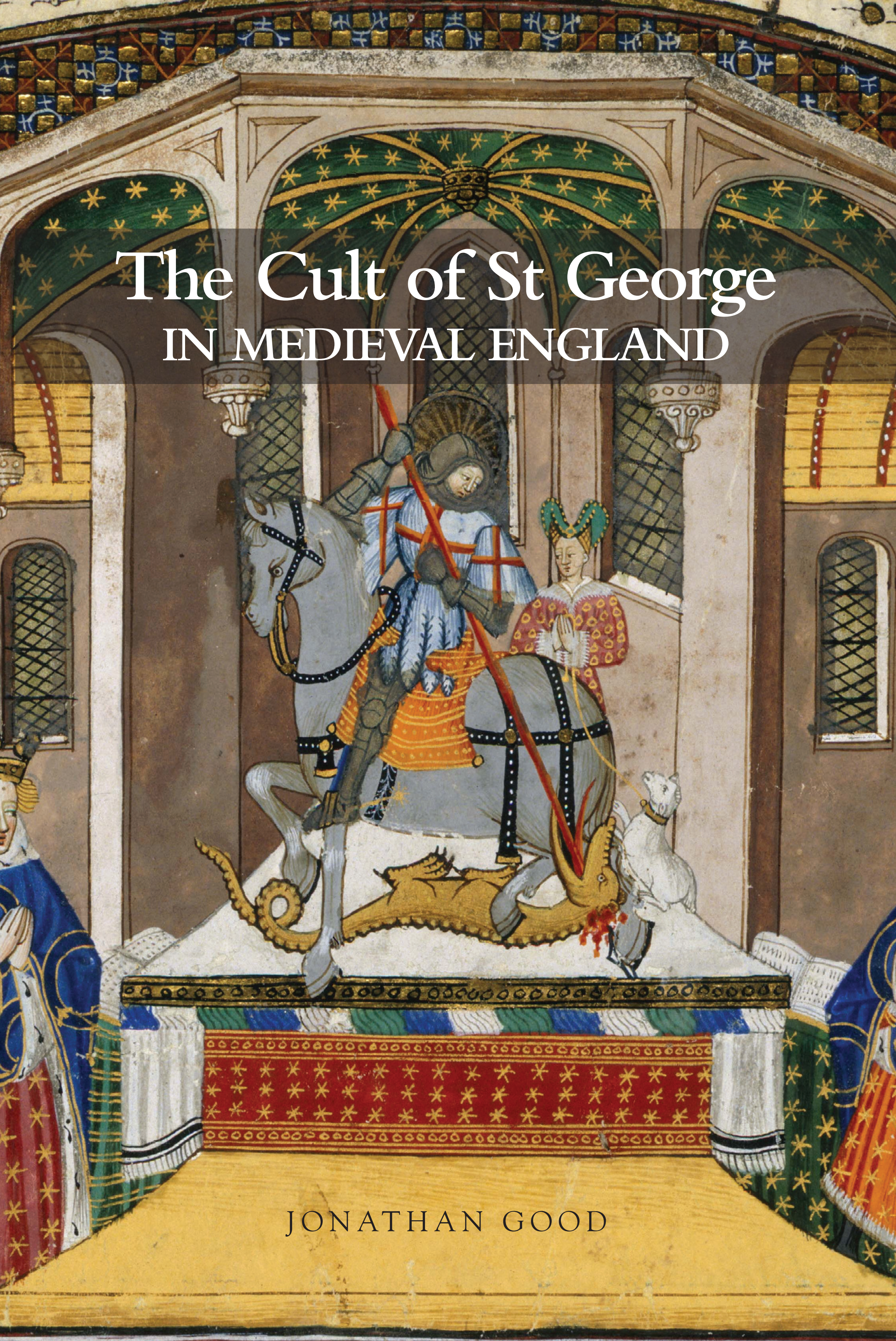

The Cult of St George
IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

JONATHAN GOOD

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Jonathan Good

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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Abbreviations

AASS	*Acta Sanctorum quotquot tota orbe coluntur*. Paris: V. Palmé, 1863–
BL	London, British Library
CCR	Calendar of Close Rolls
CChR	Calendar of Charter Rolls
CLR	Calendar of Liberate Rolls
CPR	Calendar of Patent Rolls
EETS	Early English Text Society
HMSO	His/Her Majesty's Stationery Office
MGH	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*
PL	J.-P. Migne, ed. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus … Series Latina*. 221 vols. Paris: 1844–64.
PRO	London, National Archives (Public Record Office)
REED	Records of Early English Drama

Introduction

This book is about St. George in medieval England, in particular about the process by which he became the national patron in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. St. George was not of English origin himself – if he ever even existed, he would most likely have been one of the many Christians martyred for their faith in the Eastern Roman Empire sometime in the third or early fourth centuries. Thereafter, for various reasons, he became a patron of agriculture, of the Byzantine army, of crusading against non-Christians, and of the medieval ideal of chivalry (the main reason why he came to be portrayed in legend and image as a dragon-slayer). Some or all of these qualities were appealing to any number of people across the Christian world, who thereby adopted him as their patron – the Genoese, Moscovites, and Ethiopians being only a few. Certainly the idea of crusading, or at least of "just war," was also appealing to the kings of England, starting with Edward I (1272–1307), who deployed St. George to justify their own wars with Wales, Scotland, and France. This usage was shortly taken by many in the English political community to mean that St. George was the patron, not only of the king, but also of the realm, in which they had a stake. Some reasons for this transference will be suggested below; suffice it to say that while it did not completely displace other meanings of his cult in late medieval England, it was clearly the most important, and the major reason why the saint survived the Reformation as a national symbol.

If anything served to diminish this status, therefore, it was not religious but political. Parliamentary union with Scotland in 1707 largely succeeded in subsuming "England" into the new political idea of "Britain," thereby producing a new panoply of symbols like the Royal Union Banner or the classical allegorical figure of Britannia. St. George was never entirely forgotten as a patriotic symbol, but his importance was diminished – until recently. With devolution – the creation of separate assemblies for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, granted the right to pass certain types of legislation without recourse to Westminster – the United Kingdom has become less united. Although England has not received the same level of devolved political power, the English, viewing the drifting-away of the so-called Celtic fringe and the potential "break-up of Britain," have in

general become more aware of their older, English identity. St. George, English since the late Middle Ages, has thus been making a comeback: his red-cross flag flies where once the Union Jack did, and his feast day of 23 April receives more attention every year.

As part of this revival, numerous books on St. George have also appeared.[1] By far the best has been Samantha Riches's *St George: Hero, Martyr and Myth* (2000).[2] Riches, an art historian, uses a corpus of over one hundred images of the saint, supplemented by literary evidence and historical records, to analyze the meanings of St. George's cult over the course of its existence. Riches examines his status as a long-suffering martyr, as a patron of chivalry (including an association with the Blessed Virgin Mary), as a military saint and patron of England, and as a dragon-slayer. The richly illustrated book has gone a long way toward reintroducing the English to their patron saint. The present study, however, differs from Riches's work in a number of ways. While covering some of the same ground, it is more historical than art-historical, leaning heavily on manuscript and printed record sources. It also focuses much more on George's status as a national patron in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the main reason why he is undergoing a revival today. In this way it takes after Jonathan Bengtson's 1997 article "Saint George and the Formation of English Nationalism,"[3] although explores the topic in much greater depth, including enumerating specific ways that the political and devotional cults of St. George actually overlapped. It therefore also represents a contribution to the study of premodern English nationalism, suggesting some ways that the idea of England was constituted for those beyond court and parliament.

Chapter 1 explores medieval saints' cults and medieval nationalism, including English nationalism, situating St. George in both. Chapter 2 deals with the cult's origins in the ancient Near East, its development (including St. George's accumulated statuses of martyr, warrior, crusader, and knight), and arrival in England. Chapter 3 details the deployment of St. George by the kings of England starting with Edward I and ending with Henry VII, and how this usage was shared with both the baronial class and the army,

1 Christopher Stace, *St George, Patron Saint of England* (London: Triangle, 2002); Giles Morgan, *St George: Knight, Martyr, Patron Saint and Dragonslayer* (Edison, N.J.: Chartwell, 2006).

2 Samantha Riches, *St George: Hero, Martyr and Myth* (Stroud, Glos.: Sutton, 2000).

3 Jonathan Bengtson, "Saint George and the Formation of English Nationalism," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27:2 (1997): 317-40.

both to the kings' benefit – and detriment. Chapter 4 explores some manifestations of the popular cult of St. George, including guilds of the saint, many of which embodied a uniting of political with devotional piety. Chapter 5 traces the vicissitudes of St. George in England from the Reformation to the present.

It was by no means inevitable that St. George should have become the patron of England. Understandably, most national patrons are connected in some way with their nations: the saints had been members of the nation while alive, or had ministered to it in some way, or their principal shrines were located within the nation's territory. England had plenty of such saints, many of whom fulfilled all three criteria. St. George fulfilled none of them, yet became England's patron. Why? As chance would have it, "good" kings venerated St. George, while "bad" kings did not, establishing a positive connection between the saint and the nation. George also had a number of advantages over his competitors, among them the fact that he was more chivalrous (and thus compelling), and a more powerful intercessor, than any native saints. His foreignness may have aided him, in fact, since he did not favor any particular area of the country over any other, and since he was the sort of saint to command respect on the international stage. Once established as a national patron, he represented an England that was hierarchical, but inclusive, with everyone having a proper role to play, and his chivalry reflected well on the English, regardless of their actual station. This latter fact is the main reason why St. George has remained a symbol of England to the present day.

1

George the Saint, England the Nation

The process by which St. George came to be the patron saint of England was convoluted and owed a great deal to chance. It also came relatively late in the day: other European polities had their patrons from as early as the tenth century, but the earliest possible mention of St. George being the "special protector" of the English came in 1351, and he did not replace any other saint in this category. In order to discuss why this was the case, some preliminary discussion of sainthood, and nationhood, in the late Middle Ages will be useful.

Although popular, St. George was by no means the only saint in late medieval England. To a degree difficult to imagine today, saints were ubiquitous: their names bestowed on children, churches, ships, and even bells; their feasts commemorated throughout the liturgical year; their shrines the object of pilgrimage; their images sculpted and painted in churches and homes; their stories told and retold, publicly and privately. From the second century AD, Christians had held certain deceased members of their faith in particular esteem. The posthumous title "holy" (Latin *sanctus*, hence "saint") was originally reserved for those who had maintained their faith in the face of torture and execution, although with the conversion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century the category of saint was expanded to include ascetic holy men and women, learned or well-loved ecclesiastics, and successful missionaries and other servants of the faith, and was retroactively attributed to most people in the New Testament who had had direct contact with Jesus. A day was set aside to commemorate the saint, usually the date of his or her death (i.e. "heavenly birth") although saints' days could be strategically placed to compete with pagan holidays. Originally a saint was acclaimed locally, and even after

the papacy reserved for itself the sole right to canonize saints in the eleventh century, the sustained enthusiasm of a local cult was an essential ingredient in a successful drive for canonization. Saints served as moral examples for living Christians, and the various genres of hagiography produced about them attested to their holiness in life and steadfastness in the face of death. More importantly, however, saints also served as heavenly intercessors for living Christians. God may have been ineffable, but saints, who for their merits were now with God in heaven, had once been human and knew something about the burdens borne by the average Christian in the course of his or her daily life. They were therefore ideally suited to hear prayers and pass them along to God; even to act as his deputies.[1] This conception of heaven as a sort of imperial court is only obliquely sanctioned by the canonical works of the New Testament, but it clearly fulfilled a need to humanize the divine, and remained a distinctive feature of Catholic Christianity throughout the Middle Ages.

From at least the fourth century it was believed that saints were especially receptive to prayers in the presence of their earthly remains. These relics could be elaborately entombed and the destination of people who might travel long distances on pilgrimage to seek the saint's miraculous and especially curative power.[2] Such a practice is not sanctioned by the New Testament either, but it evidently has its origins in the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, foretold in the book of Revelation and endorsed in the Nicene Creed – the saint would someday, perhaps very soon, come to reclaim his bones. Relics thus became a conduit between heaven and earth, and the Christian community that possessed them would enjoy the saint's constant protection and be especially devoted to him. A saint's patronage, however, could operate in other ways than by the proximity of relics (which could, in any case, be subdivided and shared, even stolen).[3] Saints (or at least the better-known

1 See, *inter alia*, Stephen Wilson, "Introduction," in *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History*, ed. Stephen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–53; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 155–206; Richard Marks, *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England* (Stroud, Glos.: Sutton, 2004), 86–120.

2 Ronald Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 18, 39ff. See also Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Medieval Religion* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975).

3 See Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra*, rev. edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

and powerful ones) were omnipresent enough that they might hear prayer and answer it wherever they were called upon, and many pilgrimages to saints' shrines were not to request miracles but in thanks for them.[4] The guardians of a shrine, of course, assiduously collected accounts of these miracles, in order to prove their saint's power and to maintain the flow of pilgrim traffic, which could be quite lucrative. The shrine of the murdered twelfth-century archbishop St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury was perhaps the best-known in England, although there were many others, like St. Cuthbert at Durham or St. Thomas Cantelupe at Hereford.

Patronage operated in other ways too. It is perhaps only to be expected that over time, certain saints would become known for providing certain types of miracles to certain types of people. This patronage might be explained by details in the saint's hagiography: St. Lucy had had her eyes gouged out, so was a saint to pray to for eye troubles; St. Laurence was burned alive on a gridiron, securing his patronage of cooks; St. Matthew had been a tax collector, and so became a patron of tax collectors. In this way a Christian might acquire a panoply of protecting saints over the course of his life – one for the day he was born on and which may have bequeathed him his name, one or two for his locality, one or two for his profession, and several for personal preference. In his will of 1509, King Henry VII listed Saints Michael, John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, George, Anthony, Edward, Vincent, Anne, Mary Magdalene, and Barbara as his "accustomed Avouers."[5] And although saints were known for punishing people who dishonored them in various ways (by working on their feast days, for instance), it is clear that saints competed for earthly attention. One stark example of such competition occurred when a nine-month-old boy choked on a pilgrim badge of St. Thomas Becket. The family of the boy prayed, not to Becket, but to Henry VI, widely venerated as a saint after his death in 1471. Henry caused the boy to cough the badge out, and in thanks his parents made a pilgrimage to Henry's shrine at Windsor and deposited the badge there.[6] The former king had apparently eclipsed the former archbishop in terms of curative power.[7]

But just as a Christian could esteem several saints, so also could a saint mean several things simultaneously to different people, even to the same

4 Most of the miracles collected at the tomb of Henry VI at Windsor are of this type; see Ronald Knox and Shane Leslie, eds., *The Miracles of King Henry VI* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923).

5 *The Will of King Henry VII*, ed. T. Astle (London: T. Payne and B. White, 1775), 3.

6 Knox and Leslie, eds., *Miracles*, 164–67.

7 For more on saints coming in and out of fashion, see Duffy, *Stripping*, 164–69.

people. Saint Anne was the (conjectured) mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary and grandmother to Jesus; as such, she could serve as a sanctifier of family dynasties, a help for women in childbirth, a model of female piety for cloistered nuns, and even, as the head of a family *tree*, a patron of woodworkers.[8] St. Katherine, a young Christian noblewoman from Alexandria who chose to be tortured and killed rather than marry a pagan prince, was of course a model of feminine sanctity, but also a patron of education and scholars (she had argued with and defeated fifty pagan philosophers by the force of her genius).[9] St. George also enjoyed a multifaceted patronage: he was variously an exemplary martyr, and a patron of soldiers, crusading, and chivalry, as well as of England. Such disparate meanings sometimes complemented each other, and sometimes they clashed; even a single valence of patronage could be the site of conflict as various groups tried to claim their space within it, or to use it to further some agenda. A biography of St. Anne, for instance, could be rewritten to bolster (or refute) the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, a sermon on St. Katherine could contain a strong element of patriarchal social control for women, or John Lydgate's *Life of Saints Edmund and Fremund* could contain thinly veiled praise of King Henry VI, for whom it was written.[10] Clearly, saints were complex cultural signifiers, and St. George was no exception. His connection with chivalry certainly helped his adoption as a national patron; once established, people vied for status as members of that nation through venerating him, or used him to rebuke those who were not acting properly as members.

But what was this "nation" of England? The question is a highly problematic one, for the word remains notoriously difficult to describe, let alone define. Nations are generally held to be groups into which humanity is naturally divided, groups whose members share a certain set of cultural characteristics such as language, history, religion, law, and other customs, and whose members live in a delineated and usually contiguous physical space and who acknowledge each other as fellow-members, even if they are not personally acquainted. But what exact set

8 Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, "Introduction," in *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society*, eds. Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 1–68, at 2.

9 Katherine Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2000), 11–14.

10 Ashley and Sheingorn, eds., *Interpreting*, 4–5; Lewis, *Cult of St Katherine*, 6; Karen Winstead, *John Capgrave's Fifteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 118–34.

of characteristics might constitute them, and how many of these characteristics may be shared with other nations, and how conscious (or proud) members must be of their own nations before they can be said to exist, are all matters of great contention. Further complicating the issue is the question of their origins. Most nationalists have viewed the existence of nations, especially their own, as being of great antiquity. The current dominant paradigm in their study, however, holds that they are much more recent creations, artifacts of modernity itself. Only such indisputably modern phenomena as, for example, the mass education systems required to train people to operate in an industrial economy, or the advent of standardized vernacular languages propagated by printed novels and newspapers (which give birth to "imagined" national communities), could have created the collectivities now known as nations.[11] In the Middle Ages, so the theory goes, for the vast majority of the population culture was a purely local phenomenon, with "nations" shading imperceptibly into each other across the vast expanse of Europe, all under the universalist imperative of the Roman Catholic Church. Nations only came into their own during the nineteenth- and twentieth-century "age of nationalism," when nationhood was conceived as the most important valence of human identity – and independent, unified statehood a nation's most important political goal.

Such a view, however, is not without critics. Medievalists have responded to it by demonstrating that the high Middle Ages are replete with examples of named human populations sharing ancestry myths, histories and cultures, possessing a sense of solidarity arising from common experiences, and living in a specific territory.[12] After about 900, the solidarity of these "peoples," as Susan Reynolds terms them, often coincided with the loyalties they owed to their king: due to changing inheritance laws, by which kingdoms were no longer divided among sons but inherited whole, "kingdoms and peoples came to seem identical –

11 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 35–38; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn. (London: Verso, 1991), 22–36.

12 See, e.g., Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 6–18, 32; Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–13; Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 250–331; Simon Forde, Lesley Johnson, and Alan V. Murray, eds., *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leeds: Leeds University Press, 1995).

not invariably, but sufficiently often for the coincidence of the two to seem the norm to contemporaries."[13] With statehood, national solidarity was further strengthened among such peoples as the English, Danes, French, Hungarians, Poles, Scots, and Swedes. These groups may not have had all the characteristics that their modern descendants have, but there is historical continuity between the two, and modernists are wrong to ignore or diminish them, which they must if their theories are to be valid. For Anthony Smith, the biggest testament against the idea of constructed modern nations is the profound commitment that members often feel towards them. George Orwell observed, in 1941, that there was nothing to set beside national loyalty as a *positive* force in the modern world; "Christianity and international socialism are as weak as straw in comparison."[14] Ernest Gellner's focus on the mass culture taught in schools in order to sustain an industrial economy, for instance, does not explain why people should voluntarily choose to make sacrifices for national states. Two generations of Communist indoctrination in the Soviet Union and its satellites were not able to inspire the sort of loyalty and personal self-identification characteristic of nationalism; Stalin, indeed, felt it necessary to cast the repulsion of the Nazis in the Second World War as a liberation of the fatherland, a formulation by no means in accord with Marxist ideology. Similarly, Benedict Anderson's focus on the "imagined communities" engendered by "print-capitalism" does not explain how we get from imagining the nation to feeling and loving it, and sacrificing for it when called upon to do so. Could it be that the nation acts as insurance against our own mortality, uniting the dead, living, and the yet unborn in a single community of fate?[15] Modern nationalism may have an interest in developing and enforcing a "national" culture in addition to achieving or defending self-governance, but it is not free to invent such a culture out of nothing – people have to believe that their nations represent something about themselves. National identity is personal, familial, tribal identity writ large: the nation guarantees that there are other people "like us" with whom to share language, religion, culture, and who can help protect us from the predations of others. To be successful, nationalists must appeal to things that large numbers of people already possess in great degree. This fact has given modern nationalism its widespread and

13 Reynolds, *Kingdoms*, 260.

14 George Orwell, "England Your England," in *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954), 257.

15 Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 140.

lasting political potency, and suggests that as a human trait it is not entirely new.

This book, naturally, takes the second, revisionist position regarding the existence of medieval nations. National*ism*, the uncompromising demand that one's own nation possess its own unifed sovereign state, with the refusal to acknowledge other forms of political organization as even legitimate, may be a modern phenomenon, but *national*ism – a sense of belonging to a nation coupled with a feeling of partiality towards it – is not necessarily so, and is one reason why modern nationalism has been politically so strong.[16] Indeed, if the origin of any nation deserves to be located in the premodern era, that nation is England. For a variety of reasons, England has been termed the "prototype" nation, "God's firstborn,"[17] and its premodern genesis has been located in all eras from the age of Bede to the Puritan Revolution. This book is not prepared to argue that it was the advent of St. George as the patron saint of England that served as the magical catalyst for the formation of English nationhood. St. George, however, is an important (and hitherto largely unconsidered) aspect of it, since all collectivities need symbols through which they may affirm their existence. The English royal house had honored saints before, but England also had a strong tradition of sainted *opposition* to the crown. St. George, however, was a saint around which both rulers and ruled could unite to declare their common purpose. Before we discuss national saints, however, a short survey of why a medievalist would consider England a nation is in order.

The combination of the Venerable Bede (673–735) and King Alfred of Wessex (r. 871–99) provides a powerful argument that even Anglo-Saxon England was a national state, with Bede being the theorist of the English nation and Alfred putting the theories into practice. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Church and People* presupposes an essential unity to the "English people" that was far from obvious at the time, as those people were divided among several mutually antagonistic petty kingdoms and

16 Some critics attempt to designate the second definition of "nationalism" as "patriotism." This is a legitimate word, but I do not believe that a useful distinction can be drawn between the two: since "patriotism" tends to have a more positive connotation than "nationalism," it usually serves to describe a nationalism to which a given writer is partial, bringing to mind the cliché, "I have principles, you have ideology."

17 Hastings, *Construction of Nationhood*, 35; Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 27.